



U.S. Immigration
and Customs
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News Release

EVANGELIST SPIRITS SELF AWAY AFTER CONVICTION

Flees to avoid 57 month prison sentence by lying to get emergency travel documents

ALEXANDRIA, Va.-- Fallen national evangelist Jose Vicente Mendez-Tenias showed little faith Dec. 22 that he would avoid a lengthy prison sentence when he hopped an American Airlines flight here to Mexico City and then took a connecting flight to Venezuela.

Mendez's flight came to light when he failed to appear today in federal court before Judge T.S. Ellis III. The judge sentenced Mendez in absentia to 57 concurrent months in prison (for seven counts), a \$25,000 fine, three years supervised release and a \$100 special assessment on each count.

By fleeing, the 49-year-old Venezuelan --who was released on pre-trial conditions by the court May 21-- is now an international fugitive wanted on an Obstruction of Justice warrant.

Following an investigation by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), Mendez was convicted by a federal jury here Nov. 5 in the first successful criminal trial prosecution of a person for submitting fraudulent religious worker visa applications. Mendez represented himself at trial and was convicted of six counts of visa and immigration fraud and one count of harboring illegal aliens. The conviction was announced by United States Attorney Paul J. McNulty and ICE Special Agent-in-Charge Allan Doody, who leads ICE investigations in Washington, D.C.

Mendez, whose passport was seized to prevent him from fleeing, skipped out by apparently convincing the Venezuelan Consulate to issue him emergency travel documents by claiming his son was gravely ill in Venezuela and by stressing he would return by Jan. 19 for sentencing in federal court.

The investigative leads came from Citizenship and Immigration Service's Texas Fraud Detection Unit, Office of Fraud Detection and National Security.

Mendez established a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization called the "Global Evangelism Task Force" and installed himself as the Executive Director. Mendez, who lived in the house at 16714 Friar Loop in Dumfries, Va., that serves as the organization's "headquarters," claims to hold a doctorate

from the former Soviet Union and traveled around the United States to preach before church congregations.

He targeted Spanish-speaking audiences and often came into contact with illegal aliens. When speaking, Mendez --whose wife died in a car accident-- portrayed himself as a government conspiracy victim and as an expert immigration services consultant. After preaching, Mendez would show off a portfolio of photographs of himself with famous people to establish his legitimacy. He would then offer to help victims obtain legal immigration status.

"Once he gained a victim's confidence, he charged them \$2,110 to complete fraudulent I-360 religious worker petitions," said Doody. "In order to make it look like the illegal immigrants were religious workers, Mendez would provide fake supporting documents like education degrees and certificates from seminaries across the country and false employment histories. He even forged signatures on the documents."

Mendez even had his victims unwittingly fund their own fraudulent applications. It costs \$110 to file for the petition, so he'd have them submit that amount separately with the application and then he pocketed the remaining \$2,000.

At least 135 fraudulent applications were submitted to different U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services processing centers around the nation to mask the fraud. Mendez forged the same signature on at least 88 of the applications.

"Not a single one of the applications he submitted is worth the paper they're written on," said Doody. "He sought out illegal aliens in churches and used their status to exploit them. He told them a bunch of bunk about his organization, took their money, and left them with nothing but false hope."

Mendez also hired illegal aliens to work at his Global Evangelism Task Force headquarters and allowed illegal aliens to live in his home.

He faced a possible 65 years imprisonment for all counts.

The case was prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorneys Steven Mellin and Dennis Kennedy, along with Special Assistant U.S. Attorney Gregg Malawer.

ICE

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement is the largest investigative arm of the Department of Homeland Security.